



## Our Belfast

Russell, J. (2008). *Our Belfast*. PLACE.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/01/2008

### Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via Ulster University's Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [pure-support@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:pure-support@ulster.ac.uk).

# our BELFAST

An exhibition of children's experiences  
of iconic buildings in Belfast





# our BELFAST

---

An exhibition of children's experiences  
of iconic buildings in Belfast

---

place

Published by **PLACE**  
Architecture and Built Environment Centre,  
Belfast 2008

Front cover image by *Emma, age 11*

Written by Jenny Millar for PLACE  
Copyright © PLACE Architecture and  
Built Environment Centre and authors  
Design by Tandem  
Print by Print Library

**PLACE Architecture and  
Built Environment Centre**

40 Fountain Street  
BELFAST BT1 5EE  
E: [info@place.uk.net](mailto:info@place.uk.net)  
W: [www.place.uk.net](http://www.place.uk.net)

**ISBN Number:**  
**978-0-9558728-1-5**



LOTTERY FUNDED



**place**

*Our Belfast* is funded by Awards for All.

# foreword

**PLACE is an acronym for Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Community and Environment, which are all key elements in the work that PLACE does.**

PLACE is an Architecture and Built Environment Centre which was set up in September 2004 as a joint project between the Royal Society of Ulster Architects and Belfast City Council, with support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Its aims are to promote architecture and the built environment, helping the general public understand and engage with the built environment around them.

*Our Belfast* is the result of a series of workshops which included a tour of some of the most iconic buildings in Belfast. The children involved visited one of these buildings each week, returning then to PLACE where they talked about the building and made drawings from memory. This book records the tours, workshops and the children's responses to the buildings.

PLACE would like to thank Awards for All which provided funding for the *Our Belfast* project.

# contents

<b>Our Belfast Introduction</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Linen Hall Library</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>The Grand Opera House</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>St George's Market</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Waterfront Hall</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>City Hall</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>The End!</b>	<b>48</b>

# our BELFAST

There are buildings within this city, which to different people really epitomise the place of Belfast – they are buildings, which have meaning and importance to the life of the city and the place that is Northern Ireland...BUT we all think that we know and understand these buildings – we expect that most people see and understand them in the same way that we do ourselves....

Whether or not we realise it, we often classify children's behaviour within the built environment as childish and immature. However research has shown that this behaviour is often merely the means by which children are investigating and learning to understand their environment. In addition to this, it is also clear that children's perceptions and understanding of space are different to those of their grown-up counterparts and the design of space can have a huge impact on the behaviour, well-being and education of children.

A child uses all of his or her senses to understand a place whereas adults have learnt to rely predominantly on their sense of sight. Often we tell children to "look – don't touch!" and in doing so perhaps we are stifling their own way of learning. Ultimately, children experience buildings and their environment in a way that is different to the way in which we see it.

This book is dedicated to looking at some of the iconic buildings of Belfast through the eyes of some of the children of this city in order for us to see with fresh eyes, just what these buildings offer.





Excitement during the workshops



**“Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.”**

Extract from *The Little Prince*  
Saint-Exebury

During the months of April and May 2007, Place, in conjunction with Dr Jenny Millar from the School of Architecture and Design at University of Ulster, conducted a series of workshops with local children, giving them the opportunity to view, at first hand, five of the key buildings within Belfast: the Grand Opera House, the Waterfront Hall, St, Georges Market, City Hall and the Linenhall Library. Each weekend, the children were given a tour of one of the buildings, giving them an insight into the history, structure and workings of each.

They toured the building with cameras giving them the opportunity to take their own personal pictures of things and places that were important to them. After the tour, they came back to Place where they had the opportunity to spend some time talking about the building together and drawing, from memory, different parts that they found interesting or exciting. The following pages reveal their responses to each of these buildings.



our  
BELFAST

# LINEN HALL LIBRARY

**The Linen Hall Library is the oldest library in Belfast. It was founded in 1788 and houses the greatest archive of documents on the troubles within Northern Ireland. There are 250,000 books in this collection alone!**

The library began its life as the Belfast Reading Society and after attracting the interest of some of the more prominent members of Northern Irish society, it became known as the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge in 1792. The aim of this society was threefold – to build an extensive library, to acquire a collection of different artefacts connected with the development of knowledge, and also to develop a programme of adult education for those less privileged within the city. As the library grew, the group developed a particular interest in material that was relevant to their own Northern Irish history.

While we refer to the building on Donegall Square as the Linen Hall Library, the name itself refers to the society rather than the building and during its early days, the society found that their search for a permanent residence was difficult.

The society has had its part to play in the political history of Northern Ireland. Some of the leading members of the society were revolutionaries and members of the Society of United Irishmen who rose to rebellion in 1798. The second Librarian, Thomas Russell, was a leading United Irish activist and he was arrested on the Library premises in 1796. Despite its connections to the politics of the country, while the society was allowed to purchase books ‘on political and theological subjects’, it was ‘prevented from discussing them within the society’.



**A** The original entrance to the library

**B** The well organised bookshelves and filing



**C** Best behaviour in the Governor's Room

**D** The staircase and original doorway leading onto Donegall Square

**“No institution in Northern Ireland has done more to promote enlightenment and represent a better future for all our citizens.”**

*Of the library, nobel prizewinner, Seamus Heaney*

The library's original location was not where it currently resides but in some rooms below the clock tower of the white linen hall which was located on the site where Belfast City Hall resides. The library finally managed to a secure permanent home in a linen warehouse – where it still resides today.

# LINEN HALL LIBRARY

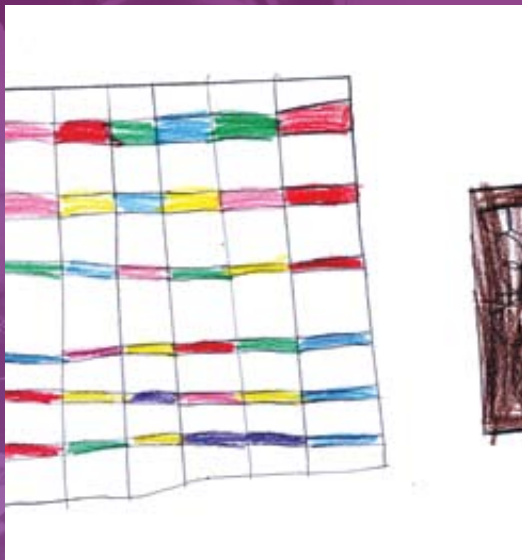
Enduring two world wars and the recent troubles, the membership of the library went into decline during the 1960s and 1970s until, at the threat of closure, a campaign was launched in order to save the Linen Hall. The library opened its doors beyond its membership and developed a number of community programmes. As the membership began to rise, it became evident that the lack of space in the existing warehouse would be a problem and an extension was planned following the acquisition of some neighbouring property.

The new extension highlights the position of the library today as one which is firmly placed in the present, yet still maintains its links to history.

Spatially, the new extension to the library provides a link between the main building and a number of disparate rooms in the adjoining building. The existing warehouse space acts as the main public arena for books, while the other spaces the staff offices and a meeting room, which can also be completely blacked out for presentations.



Claire, age 11



Alanna, age 5



Oonagh, age 11



Meibh, age 9



Jessica, age 6, liked the spiral staircase.



# LINEN HALL LIBRARY

The tour of the Linen Hall Library began outside the building on Donegall Square where Hugh explained that the Library used to be located on the site of the City Hall before moving to its current location.

Following this, the tour moved to the new entrance of the library. The narrow space where this new entrance sits between two existing buildings was pointed out.

The tour then proceeded into the main building and up the new staircase to the different spaces in the extension. The stair landings, from which there are views over Fountain Street, were of particular interest to the children, giving them a birds eye view of the people in the street below.



A



B

- A Vertical Gallery exhibition space
- B Stair case in main Library
- C Cuisle glides down the central staircase
- D Hugh shows us old street plans of Belfast City Centre



C



D



# LINEN HALL LIBRARY

**“I like the old part  
best. I like the books  
and the room we went  
into with all of the  
old books.”**

*Gaby, age 11*

As with the Grand Opera House, the children were asked to share about which parts of the library they most enjoyed and liked the best, to which the overriding answer was the original building. Although they did not dislike the new extension, it appears that the detail within the original building is something that they really enjoyed...

Perhaps since children experience their environment by means of all of their senses, the tactile quality of the original building stimulates their sense of touch and thus it becomes their preferred space.



*Maeve, age 9*



*Gaby, age 11*



*Caolan, age 7*

# THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

**Completed in 1895, the Grand Opera House in Belfast, first opened in the December of that year, becoming the most prestigious entertainment venue in Northern Ireland.**

Designed by Frank Matcham, the Opera House is one of 20 surviving Matcham Theatres throughout the UK, which include the Hackney Empire, Tower Ballroom, Blackpool and the London Coliseum. Matcham is synonymous with theatre design even though he never actually qualified as an architect.

With the introduction of television and the popularity of the cinema, the splendour of the Opera House was seen as old-fashioned, but following a renewed interest in Victorian buildings during the 1970's and a campaign by the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, the building was both listed and restored.

The Opera House was substantially damaged by bombs targeting the Europa Hotel in both 1991 and 1993 and much had to be extensively rebuilt. However, the auditorium, the jewel of the Opera House (and indeed of any theatre), had little damage and remained mostly intact. The auditorium itself is thought to be the finest example of the oriental style applied to theatre architecture in the UK today.



**“Do you see the drums down there? I’d love to be down there!”**

*Conrad, age 11*

- A Grand Opera House from Great Victoria Street
- B The new extension
- C The children try out the stage



# THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

It has hosted many famous names throughout the years including Gracie Fields, James Johnston, Van Morrison and Kenneth Branagh, and in 1963 it hosted the UK debut of Luciano Pavarotti as Lieutenant Pinkerton in a production of *Madame Butterfly*.

Last year, the Grand Opera House reopened following both restoration and extension to provide many new facilities including a small studio theatre, new dressing rooms and restaurant, which will enable the theatre to not only house many of the larger international touring companies, but also continue as an important entertainment venue within the city.



Maeve, age 9 (above and bottom right)



Jessica, age 6 (above)





# THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

The children began their tour of the building in the main auditorium where William told them about the history and importance of the building. They were able to lie back and look at Matcham's painted ceiling and to count the number of elephants on display.



Having the opportunity to be in the theatre on their own gave the children the chance to investigate it as much as they wanted. Some used the rows of seats as a racetrack, others made their way, albeit cautiously, up on to the stage where it was wonderful to see their expressions – full of wonder and fear as looked at the theatre from the vantage point of the performers.

While often we presume that children are fearless, and while many of the group took to standing on the stage easily, their first expression of comprehending the scale of the space was wonderful to watch: have you ever turned to look at the whole theatre from the front row of the stalls? Sometimes it takes the wonder of a child's expression to make us turn round and experience the space that we're in.

The children progressed up through the different tiers of the theatre and their excitement grew as they got higher and higher above the stalls.



Nicole, age 7 (above and below right)



Cuisle, age 9

**"I liked the old part best because it's got a ghost and I like the elephants as well."**

Roise, age 7



- A Seating in 'the stalls'
- B The view of the stage from 'the gods'
- C Looking up at the newest addition, the Baby Grand



# THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

**“I liked the old part best  
because it’s got a ghost  
and I like the elephants  
as well.”**

*Roise, age 7*

The tour continued into the new section of the building where the children were able to see the new Baby Grand studio theatre and all of the backstage spaces including the dressing rooms and the orchestra pit.

These children are the next generation – part of a generation of video games and skyscrapers, however all of them, when asked which part of the building they liked most, replied by saying the old part. Perhaps it is due to the opulence and splendour of the main theatre, or possibly the fact that it does feel a little like being part of another world, that the memories that they took back to the workshop to draw were of the original building.



*Brendan, age 9*



*Conrad, age 11*



our  
BELFAST

# ST GEORGE'S MARKET

As the last surviving Victorian covered market in Belfast, St George's is one of Belfast's oldest attractions and still maintains its status today as one of the best markets in the UK. It was built in three phases between 1890 and 1896 and was completely refurbished in 1997.



The Friday variety market and Saturday food market are hugely popular with the city and within them you can find anything from potted herring to signed programmes from some of Manchester United's early matches! The fish section alone contains 23 fish stalls and holds a reputation for being the leading retail fish market in Ireland.



**"It was really light inside.  
It was almost like being  
outside!"**

*Riona, age 11*

- A The silhouetted entrance
- B The beautiful stonework above the entrance
- C The roof lets in lots of natural light
- D Ironwork gating on the doorway

Images above right to left: Nuala, age 9; Riona, age 11; Brendan, age 9



# ST GEORGE'S MARKET

St George's Market was voted one of the top 5 UK markets in 2006 by the National Association of British Market Authorities, however, while the popularity of St George's Market is undeniable, there is still a large proportion of the population who have never visited and are unaware of the vibrancy and sense of community offered from this part of the city.

The building that currently sits on the site was not the original market, which dates back as far as the 1640's, however it is the present building which is so highly regarded today. The designer of the neighbouring Albert Bridge, of which the original collapsed in the 1880's, was the city surveyor JC Bretland and it was Bretland who also designed St George's Market. Built from the traditional red brick of Belfast, the building is structured by cast iron columns and beams supporting a glazed roof, which gives the market its light and airy feel.



A



B



C

- A Caolan finds a new friend
- B Meibh and Roise take a break
- C Brendan picks up a chick



Jessica, age 6 (above and left)



# ST GEORGE'S MARKET

A combination of the children and the sugary treats offered by the stalls of St George's meant that the workshop within this particular space was at the very least exciting!

- A The children enjoying the view at St George's Market
- B The baby donkey was too young to join in with the workshop

None of the children had ever been to St George's before and the excitement, which was so apparent in their behaviour as they moved through the market, was wonderful to watch. Often, we don't realise the importance of a space on our experience of an event and this is incredibly obvious at St George's.



A



"I got to hold a rabbit and a guinea pig. I liked all of the food...especially the nachos!"

Brendan, age 9

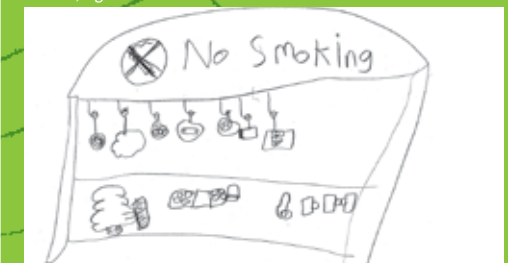
Aine, age 10



B



Conan, age 11



Nicole, age 7



# ST GEORGE'S MARKET

**"I loved how there were so many things everywhere to see"**

*Cuisle, age 9*

A Lining up for free samples

*Images right (top to bottom):  
Roise, age 7; Aine, age 10*



Andrew began the tour with a talk about the history of the market and then the children were given the opportunity to wander around the extent of the space, taking photographs and looking at the different stall displays.

It is clear that the different stalls within the space were the focus of the children's enjoyment and this was amplified by a touring exhibit from a local city farmer who had chickens, rabbits and a donkey within the market. Did the children enjoy this workshop? There was a resounding yes from all who took part. The sweets, cookies and juice available also played an integral part in their enjoyment!





# WATERFRONT HALL

**Designed by Robinson MacIlwaine Architects of Belfast, the Waterfront Hall was the first of a number of buildings to be built within that section of the Lagside development.**

The building is a cylindrical form with the auditorium sitting centrally together with front of house spaces, while staff and performer facilities are located around the circumference. The hall itself is used for a variety of different events and its flexibility comes from the design of the stage area. The floor works on a number of hydraulic sections that can be arranged to suit the type of performance or meeting taking place. Ultimately, the space can be used for events as wide ranging as an exhibition hall on a flat floor space to a fully functioning proscenium theatre.

One of the main design concepts for the building was that of the Titanic, which was built at the neighbouring Harland and Woolf Shipyard that can be seen from the gallery bar spaces.

The main staircase within the foyer recollects the grand staircase of the Titanic, and some of the architectural features resemble the prow of the ship. The main auditorium is accessed by means of glazed floors, which link the drum of the auditorium to the gallery spaces running around it. This alludes to the process by which you board a ship.

A Roise and Meibh play on the staircase  
B Waterfront Hall



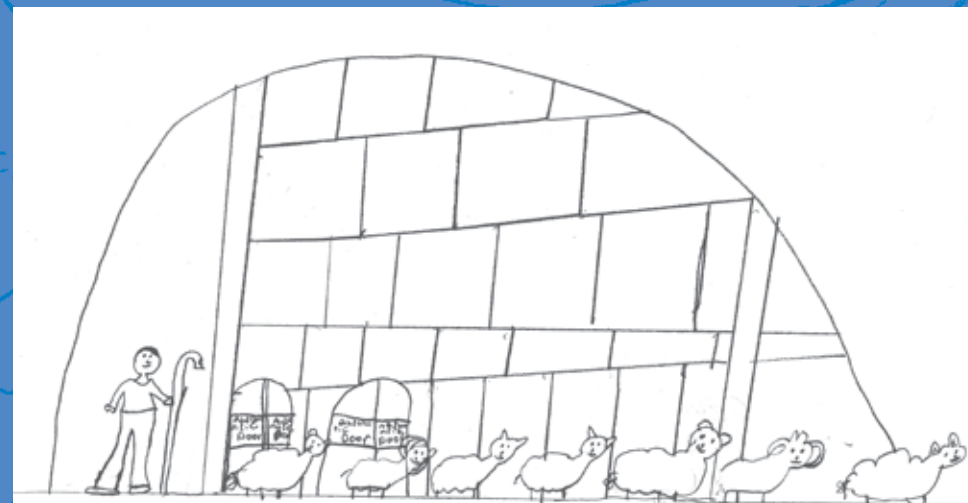
A



B

**"I liked the sheep outside that I could sit on...we all sat on them after we had been inside."**

*Jessica, age 6*



*Meibh, age 9*



# WATERFRONT HALL



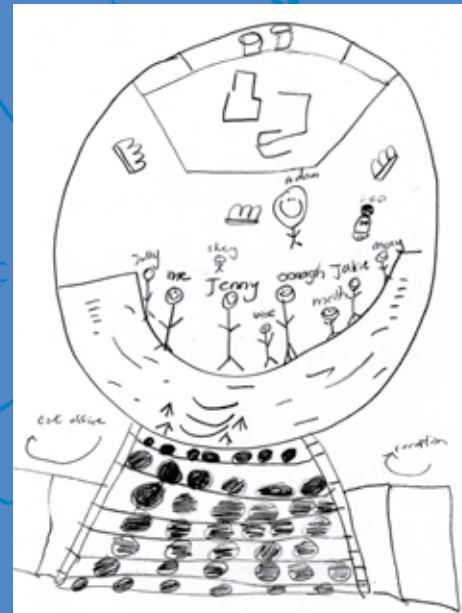
A Seating in the Auditorium

The layered form of the seating arrangement and the structural system in place allows every member of the audience to have an uninterrupted view of the stage. It seats over 2,000 people.

Although the form of the building is unlike the traditional buildings of Belfast, it is constructed of the traditional Belfast red brick and topped with a copper dome. It has a large projecting window spanning all three floors which allows those using the bars and restaurants within the building to have clear views both up and down the river Lagan.



Jessica, age 6



Cuile, age 9



Roise, age 7



# WATERFRONT HALL

The tour began in the main entrance foyer to the building where the purpose of the building and the links to Titanic were explained to the children.

- A The view of the courts from the café
- B The girls ask if the building has a ghost
- C Adam explains the history of the building

They were asked to try to spot all of the different elements of the building that reminded them of a ship.

As the tour continued, Adam - our guide - led all of the children onto the glazed floor between the auditorium and the gallery and without warning, jumped up and landed with a start on the glass. Although he meant to make all of the children jump, while the children remained unfazed, Jenny seemed to get the fright of her life!

As at the Grand Opera House, the rows of seats provided the children with a racetrack and many of the children experienced the building at speed. The Waterfront Hall and the surrounding landscaping are home to a number of works of public art owned by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The Sheep on the Road, 1991, by Deborah Brown at the main building entrance proved very popular as seats for the children and the photographic exhibition of Belfast revealed just how much the children had learnt from the previous buildings, picking out obscure pictures of both the Grand Opera House and the Linen Hall Library.

**“Adam told us it was meant to be like a boat...it reminded me of the Titanic film”**

*Oonagh, age 11*



A

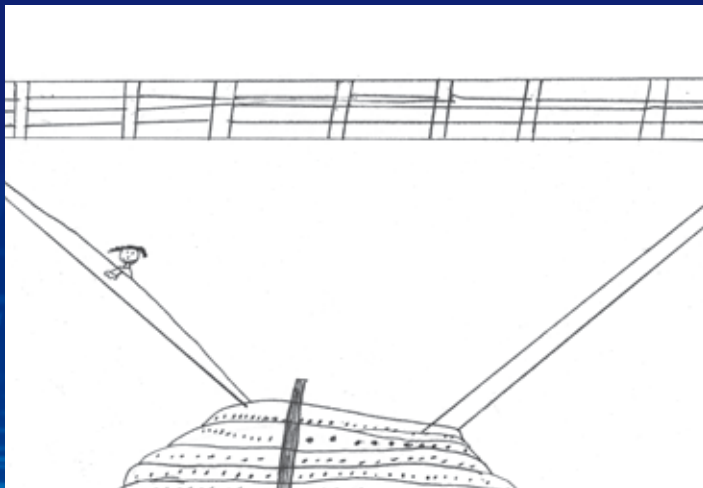


B



C

# WATERFRONT HALL



Meibh, age 9

**“I liked the room with  
all the seats and a stage  
and I liked the stairs.”**

*Waterfront Hall, Meibh age 9*

One of the children, who had been on the previous tours, pointed out that the colour used to paint a section of the new extension to the Grand Opera House reflected the colour of the some of elements within the Waterfront Hall, and also the colour of the domed roofs of the City Hall, which can be seen from the upper floors of the Waterfront. To hear a child make such a profound comment about their environment was really exciting. Often we tend to look at things without actually seeing them properly and the insight of a child aged seven really opened the eyes of all of the adults on the tour.



Jessica, age 6



**A** The stage is set up for a graduation ceremony



Meibh, age 9



# CITY HALL

Following Belfast's appointment to city status, granted by Queen Victoria in 1888, Belfast City Hall was designed by Alfred Brumwell Thomas to reflect this status and was completed in 1906 at the cost of £500,000.

- A The beautiful entrance portico  
B Looking up at the fancy detail on top of the columns

Built of Portland stone, the building is an iconic reflection of the city of Belfast today. It covers a site of one and a half acres and unbeknownst to those who haven't been inside, has a courtyard in the middle. Its most famous feature, the central dome, is recognised across the city due to its striking green copper roof.

The City Hall of Durban, South Africa is almost an exact replica of Belfast's City Hall. It was built in 1910 and designed by Stanley G Hudson, who was inspired by Brumwell Thomas' design.

Although well known as the building that sits at the entrance to Royal Avenue, many have never ventured inside to view the interior space of the City Hall. Both the entrance hall and the grand staircase are lined with four types of marble, three from Italy and one from Greece.

The Great Hall was badly damaged during a bombing raid of the Second World War but was completely restored, including the original seven stained glass windows. At the outbreak of the war in 1939, the windows were removed in order to keep them safe. Four of the windows show the Coats of Arms of the four provinces of Ireland - Ulster, Munster, Connacht and Leinster. The others feature portraits of William III, Queen Victoria and King Edward VI.



A



B



Rhian, age 7

**"The big red staircase on the way in was great."**

Owen, age 10



**“I liked sitting in the big seat and wearing the robe... and the windows were really pretty.”**

*Charis, age 10*

City Hall is possibly the most famous icon of Belfast. As it has now completed its centenary celebrations, City Hall will close for some time in order for renovations and essential maintenance to be carried out to preserve the building for the years to come.

The main dome, which rises above the grand staircase, reaches a height of approximately 53 metres and includes a whispering gallery similar to St Paul's Cathedral in London. The name comes from a phenomenon, which occurs in the construction of certain domes, whereby a whisper against the walls can be heard on the opposite side. Above the main dome is a miniature dome, which rises up on a circular colonnade. The stained glass windows of City Hall record different historical events from the history of the city.



- A Inside the central dome
- B Bringing Council to order
- C Councillor Owen

The building has several important rooms in addition to the grand staircase: the Council Chamber; the Great Hall, the Reception Room; and the East Staircase. There are 51 councillors and they hold council on the first day of every month in the Council Chamber. The chamber is arranged much the same way as the Houses of Parliament in London, with councillors sitting facing each other, chaired from the top of the room.



*Owen, age 10*





our  
BELFAST

# CITY HALL

**The gasp from the children when they entered the main foyer of City Hall was audible. It is quite an experience to view the foyer for the first time.**

This was the starting point for the tour and the children were led up the grand staircase to the first floor, with various stained glass windows being pointed out along the way. The phenomenon of the whispering gallery was explained to them and they were astonished at the echoes produced by the main dome.

From the first floor landing, the children were led down a corridor past all of the paintings of the previous mayors of Belfast, and were invited into the Council Chamber. They quickly took on the character of different members of council and this was accentuated when they were given the opportunity to wear one of the council gowns. It was amazing to watch how the experience induced the children to improvise different scenes. The tour progressed from the boardroom into the grand ballroom where the history of the room, its reconstruction and the life story of the stained glass windows were explained. The dance floor beckoned and the girls within the group were the centre of attention as they twirled and skipped within the space.

**“I can dance on the floor.  
We can dance together.”**

*Rhian, age 7*



A



B



C



D

- A Corridor with portraits of mayors
- B Some spaces were very comfortable
- C The girls dancing together
- D Detail of intricate woodwork





Rhian, age 7

In having the opportunity to enter and see a space that they would normally just walk past, the imaginations of the children as they spent time in this space, appeared to slip over into their outward behaviour. Along with the senses, imagination is also important when it comes to the means by which children understand and experience a space.

The space does not only offer them that which is visible, but it also offers them the opportunity to experience the space at a totally different level to the eyes of their imagination. It is wonderful to watch!



Charis, age 10 (above and below)



A The Grand Staircase





# THE END!

We hope that this book has helped you to see some of the buildings of Belfast in a different way – through new eyes. It may have even helped you to learn something new about your own city.

Belfast is exciting and it is changing. Often we forget to look at the buildings around us as we rush past. These children have opened a window into the things that they look at. Lets take time to see these buildings differently – or even, just see these buildings!

We would like to thank Aine, Alanna, Brendan, Caolan, Charis, Claire, Conan, Conrad, Cuisle, Emma, Gaby, Jessica, Maeve, Meibh, Nicole, Nuala, Oonagh, Owen, Rhian, Rhiona and Roise for the excitement that they brought to this project, allowing us the opportunity to view, through their eyes, 'our Belfast'.



A



B



C

**“When I grow up  
(as everyone does)  
what will become  
of the me I was?”**

Aileen Fisher  
*Growing Up, 1991*

- A Butter wouldn't melt in their mouths!
- B Oonagh concentrates very hard
- C Work in progress

# biography

---



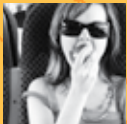
**Dr Jenny Millar**

is a lecturer in Architecture at the University of Ulster. Her primary interest lies in architecture as a social tool, particularly within the area of spatial perception and cognition.



**Morven McFadden**

is Curator at PLACE Architecture and Built Environment Centre.



**Amberlea Trainor**

is the Administrative Assistant at PLACE.

---

**Our Belfast exhibition was made possible  
with the help from:**

**Aine  
Alanna  
Brendan  
Caolan  
Charis  
Claire  
Conan**

**Conrad  
Cuisle  
Emma  
Gaby  
Jessica  
Maeve  
Meibh**

**Nicole  
Nuala  
Oonagh  
Owen  
Rhian  
Riona  
Roise**

---

PLACE Architecture and Built Environment Centre  
40 Fountain Street BELFAST BT1 5EE E: [info@place.uk.net](mailto:info@place.uk.net) W: [www.place.uk.net](http://www.place.uk.net)



# our BELFAST

An exhibition of children's experiences  
of iconic buildings in Belfast

**PLACE Architecture and  
Built Environment Centre**

40 Fountain Street  
BELFAST BT1 5EE  
E: [info@place.uk.net](mailto:info@place.uk.net)  
W: [www.place.uk.net](http://www.place.uk.net)



LOTTERY FUNDED



**place**